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Historically Informed Rendering of the Librettos from Bach's Church Cantatas

Michael Marissen

Neither traditional Bach scholarship nor historically informed performance have generally given enough attention to an essential problem: what do the German texts Bach set in his church cantatas actually mean? When preparing English translations, of course, this question cannot be ignored, and historical work in religion, Bible, and language can provide sound answers. I will propose new findings in five categories: 1) where the text seems straightforward but has a different meaning when viewed biblically, 2) where the text assumes specific biblical knowledge on the part of the listener to complete its thought, 3) where the text assumes specific knowledge of Lutheran theology, 4) where the text contains archaic language, and 5) where the text may on the face of it seem well nigh unto impossible to understand.

MEANINGS MADE CLEAR BY BIBLICAL REFERENCES

For a first example, consider the following italicized passage in the bass recitative from Bach's Cantata 122, *Das neugeborne Kindelein*:

Dies ist ein Tag, den selbst der Herr gemacht,
 Der seinen Sohn in diese Welt gebracht.
 O selge Zeit, die nun erfüllt!
 O gläubigs Warten, das nunmehr gestillt!
 O Glaube, der sein Ende sieht!
 O Liebe, die Gott zu sich zieht!
 O Freudigkeit, so durch die Trübsal dringt
 Und Gott der Lippen Opfer bringt!

TERRY¹ (1926)

O love, enter in God's light!

UNGER⁵ (1996)

O love, which God to itself draws!

DRINKER² (1942)

Oh staunchness, to God and His will!

HERREWEGHE cd⁶ (1996)

O love, that God has accepted!

HARNONCOURT cd³ (1982)

Oh staunchness, to God and His will!

STOKES⁷ (1999)

O Love, that draws God to itself!

AMBROSE⁴ (1984)

O love here, which doth draw God nigh!

KOOPMAN cd⁸ (2003)O love here, which doth draw God
nigh!

For Cantata 122 all our translators agree that the bass recitative speaks of love that draws God to itself. On solely grammatical grounds, however, the thought could just as easily be that the "drawing" is being performed by "God," not by "love." From a Lutheran theological perspective—where God initiates, people respond—this is more likely to be the intended reading, as the biblical passage it presumably alludes to, Jeremiah 31:3, says in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day⁹:

Der HErr ist mir erschienen von fernen: Ich [*Gott*] habe dich je und je *geliebet*,
darum hab ich dich *zu mir gezogen* aus lauter Güte.

("The LORD has appeared to me from afar: 'I [i.e., *God*] have *loved* you forever and ever; therefore have I *drawn* you *to me* out of pure kindness.'")

Thus, the Cantata 122 passage should probably best be rendered, "O love which God draws to himself."

As a second, more involved example consider the alto aria from Cantata 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*:

*Kreuz und Krone sind verbunden,
Kampf und Kleinod sind vereint.
Christen haben alle Stunden
Ihre Qual und ihren Feind,
Doch ihr Trost sind Christi Wunden.*

TERRY (1926)

Cross and crown are one together,
Only striving victory gives.SUZUKI cd¹² (1996)Cross and crown are linked to
gether,
Struggle and jewel are united.

DRINKER (1942)

Cross and Crown are bound together,
Palm and war together go.
(*or*, Palm and battle gether go.)

UNGER (1996)

Cross and crown are tied together,
Battle and treasure are united.

LEONHARDT cd¹⁰ (1971)

Cross and crown are joined together,
Struggle and gem are united.

STOKES (1999)

Cross and crown are bound
together,
Conflict and jewel are united.

AMBROSE (1984)

Cross and crown are joined together,
Gem and conflict are made one.

JUNGHÄNEL cd¹³ (2000)

Cross and crown are joined
together,
Struggle and gem are united.

KOOPMAN cd¹¹ (1995)

Cross and crown are joined together,
Struggle and gem are united.

RIFKIN cd¹⁴ (2001)

Cross and crown are bound
together,
Struggle and the jewel are one.

Each translation makes good Lutheran sense of the first line, but what does it mean to say that “conflict and jewel are united”? That one can win valuable booty in war? To get a better sense of the meaning of the second line we can turn to Luther’s rendering of 1 Corinthians 9:24–25¹⁵:

Wisset ihr nicht, daß die, so in den Schranken laufen, die laufen alle, aber Einer erlanget das *Kleinod*? Laufet nun also, daß ihr es ergreiftet. Ein jeglicher aber, der da *kämpfet*, enthält sich alles Dinges: jene also, daß sie eine vergängliche *Krone* empfangen; Wir aber eine unvergängliche.

(“Do you not know that they who run in the course, run all; but one gets the [prize] medal? Now then, run, that you may obtain it. But each man who *competes*, abstains from all things: those men [will exercise this self-control], then, that they may receive a perishable *crown* [i.e., a victory wreath]; but we [abstain so that we may receive] an imperishable one.”)

In light of this passage, then, the *Kleinod* of Cantata 12 would be not a jewel or gem but the bronze, silver, or gold medal a winner receives in a sports contest. (In other contexts, however, such as in the bass aria from Cantata 197a, *Kleinod* can indeed mean “jewel” or “gem.”) Likewise, the *Kampf* in line 2 is not primarily a battle, struggle, or conflict but a contest or competition, i.e., a *Wettkampf*. And the *Krone* is not primarily a regal, diamond-studded crown of metal but a crown of victory, a wreath whose leaves would be expected eventually to decay.¹⁶ (Yet note that the aria does go on to speak of the Christian’s everlasting “enemy,” just as 1 Corinthians 9:26 goes on to speak of “fighting” [Luther: *fechten*, literally “fencing”].) Thus, a historically informed rendering of these lines would read, “Cross and victory wreath are bound together, / Contest and prize medal are united.”

This reading would jibe well with Bach’s musical setting too. For a start, in this aria the first vocal solo is accompanied by the whole of the oboe line

that had preceded it—thus ritornello and episode, too, are “*vereint*.”¹⁷ Furthermore, a longstanding editorial quandary becomes unperplexing when the libretto is understood biblically. The great music historian Arnold Schering could not believe that Bach intended the alto to continue singing at the fourth eighth-note of bar 16 and for the oboe to follow with its canon at the second eighth-note of bar 17.¹⁸ Schering emended the passage so that the oboe takes the reading of the alto entry at bar 16, and the alto follows in canon not at the second but at the *fourth* eighth-note of bar 17. (Incidentally, Junghänel’s recording adopts Schering’s contrapuntal emendation but switches his scoring around so that the oboe follows the alto.) But in Bach’s notation, the alto and oboe engage in a brief canonic chase where they end together, “*vereint*,” on the third quarter note of bar 17.

MEANINGS MADE CLEAR BY IMPLIED BIBLICAL PHRASES

This category involves passages that are verbally incomplete (knowingly) and thus can easily be misunderstood. Consider the first bass recitative from Cantata 152, *Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn*:

*Der Heiland ist gesetzt
In Israel zum Fall und Auferstehen.
Der edle Stein ist sonder Schuld,
Wenn sich die böse Welt
So hart an ihm verletzt,
Ja, über ihn zur Höllen fällt,
Weil sie boshaftig an ihn rennet
Und Gottes Huld
Und Gnade nicht erkennt!
Doch selig ist
Ein auserwählter Christ,
Der seinen Glaubensgrund auf diesen Eckstein leget,
Weil er dadurch Heil und Erlösung findet.*

TERRY (1926)
The Saviour now is set
in Israel for fall and rise of many.

KOOPMAN cd²¹ (1995)
A symbol is this child
In Israel, of death and
Resurrection!

DRINKER (1942)
A symbol is this child
in Israel, of death and Resurrection!

UNGER (1996)
The Savior has been established
In Israel for falling and rising.

AMBROSE (1984)

The Savior is in charge
In Israel o'er fall and resurrection.

SUZUKI cd²² (1997)

The saviour is sent
To Israel, to fall and be
resurrected!

HARNONCOURT cd¹⁹ (1985)

A symbol is this child
in Israel, of death and Resurrection!

STOKES (1999)

The Saviour has been placed in
Israel
For the fall and resurrection.

RICERCAR cd²⁰ (1989)

The saviour was condemned to death in
Israel, and there also to be resurrected!

TAYLOR cd²³ (2002)

A symbol is this child
In Israel, of death and
Resurrection!

Here our translators give a striking variety of readings for the opening lines. Nonetheless, this movement is most likely neither about Jesus' falling and rising, nor his being placed or set in Israel (as opposed to, say, in Egypt), nor his being a symbol, nor his being condemned in Israel. Bach's congregations would have just heard a pericope from Luke 2 chanted in the liturgy,²⁴ which at verse 34b reads:

Siehe, dieser wird gesetzt zu einem Fall und Auferstehen vieler in Israel; . . .
("Look, this one is set for a fall and rising again of many in Israel; . . .")

That is to say, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was placed by God for the fall and rising again of *many people in Israel*. The recitative lines from Cantata 152 would thus be best rendered, "The Savior is set / For the fall and rising again [of many] in Israel!," in recognition of the scriptural passage it is meant to echo.

For a second example, consider the bass aria from Cantata 98, *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan*:

*Meinen Jesum laß ich nicht,
Bis mich erst sein Angesicht
Wird erhören oder segnen.
Er allein
Soll mein Schutz in allem sein,
Was mir Übels kann begegnen.*

TERRY (1926)

Never Jesus will I leave
Till He shall upon me breathe
Words of comfort and His blessing.

UNGER (1996)

I will not my Jesus go,
Until his countenance
Will grant favorable hearing (to
me) or bless (me).

DRINKER (1942)

Jesus will I never leave
'til His blessing I receive,
He will aid me and abet me.

LEONHARDT cd²⁵ (1979)

Jesus will I never leave
'til His blessing I receive,
He will aid me and abet me.

AMBROSE (1984)

I my Jesus shall not leave
Till me first his countenance
Shall give favor or its blessing.

STOKES (1999)

I shall not forsake my Jesus,
Until He
Hear me and bless me.

GARDINER cd²⁶ (2000)

I shall not let my Jesus go
until His face
shall hear my prayer or bless me.

Only the rendering in the Gardiner cd catches fully the apparent allusion to Genesis 32:26, with both the verb "to go" and its auxiliary "let."

Und er sprach: *Laß mich gehen*, denn die Morgenröte bricht an. Aber er antwortete: Ich *lasse* dich nicht [*gehen*], du segnest mich denn.

("And he [the man/angel/God] said: 'Let me go, for the rubescence of the morning [sky] is breaking in.' But he [Jacob] answered: 'I will not let you [*go*], unless you bless me.'")

In Cantata 98, then, the text does not speak of "leaving" Jesus, much less of "forsaking" him. It suggests rather that followers of Jesus metaphorically relive the experience of Jacob: they are in a profound spiritual struggle, and they will not let go in this wrestling match until they are blessed. (According to Luther's radically Christocentric reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was actually Christ himself whom Jacob wrestled with at Peniel.²⁷) An informed translation would thus read, "I shall not let my Jesus [*go*], until his face gives heed to me or blesses me."

MEANINGS MADE CLEAR FROM BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL REFERENCES

The soprano aria from Cantata 80, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, seems straightforwardly to affirm that God's image should "shine once again in me," and most translators appear to agree.

Komm in mein Herzenshaus,
Herr Jesu, mein Verlangen!

Treib Welt und Satan aus
 Und laß dein Bild in mir erneuert prangen!
 Weg, schnöder Sündengraus!

TERRY (1926)
 And make my soul Thine own new
 garnished dwelling!

RIFKIN cd²⁹ (1987)
 And let thy image shine renewed
 within me.

DRINKER (1942)
 and let Thine image ever shine before me.

HERREWHEGE cd³⁰ (1990)
 And let your image shine again
 within me!

HARNONCOURT cd²⁸ (1978)
 and let Thine image ever shine before me.

UNGER (1996)
 And let thine image be resplendent
 anew in me!

AMBROSE (1984)
 And let thine image find in me new glory!

STOKES (1999)
 And let your image gleam in me
 anew!

But with its use of *erneuert*, however, the text more likely projects a somewhat different sense, namely: “let your image shine forth in a renewed me.” This reading reflects Luther’s subtle but theologically significant understanding of Colossians 3:9–11³¹:

Lüget nicht untereinander; ziehet den alten Menschen mit seinen Werken aus und ziehet den neuen an, der da *erneuert*³² wird zu der Erkenntnis, nach dem Ebenbilde des, der ihn geschaffen hat: da nicht ist Grieche, Jude, Beschneidung, Vorhaut, Ungrieche, Scythe, Knecht, Freier; sondern alles und in allen Christus.

(“Do not lie to one another; put off the old man [i.e., the fallen Adam] and his works and and put on the new [i.e., the sinless Christ, who is the new man], which is being *renewed* in knowledge according to the *image* of him who has created him: where there is no Greek, Jew, circumcision, foreskin, non-Greek, Scythian, servant, free man; rather all, and in all, is Christ.”)

In this reading of Paul’s letter, a person who has put on the New Man (Christ) is renewed according to the image of God (i.e., a person’s whole being as the “image of God” is restored by union with Christ, who is the very “image of the invisible God,” according to Colossians 1:15—it is not God’s image itself that is renovated: rather, fallen human beings are made new into God’s image³³). The text from Bach’s cantata, then, would be speaking of a renewed person, not of a radiance anew or of God’s image being made new. A meticulous translation would thus be, “And let your image shine in me [who is being] renewed [in knowledge after the image of the creator].”

A second example: In the closing chorale from Cantata 190, *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, there is some confusion among translators about the sense of the third line from the end.

Laß uns das Jahr vollbringen
 Zu Lob dem Namen dein,
 Daß wir demselben singen
 In der Christen Gemein;
 Wollst uns das Leben fristen
 Durch dein allmächtig Hand,
 Erhalt deine lieben Christen
 Und unser Vaterland.
 Dein Segen zu uns wende,
 Gib Fried an allem Ende;
Gib unverfälscht im Lande
Dein seligmachend Wort.
Die Heuchler³⁴ mach zuschanden
Hier und an allem Ort!

TERRY (1926)
 Stablish among believers
 Thine own Almighty realm,
 And all earth's vain deceivers
 Right utterly o'erwhelm!

DRINKER (1942)
 let truth and simple candor
 to honor be restored,
 hypocrisy and slander
 be ev'rywhere abhorred.

AMBROSE (1984)
 Give unalloyed this country
 Thy grace-inspiring word.
 To hypocrites bring ruin
 Both here and ev'rywhere!

UNGER (1996)
 Grant unadulterated in this land
 Thy beatific Word.
 Confound all hypocrites
 Here and in every place!

KOOPMAN cd³⁵ (1998)
 Spread thy beatific word
 unadulterated throughout the land.
 Confound the hypocrites
 here and everywhere!

STOKES (1999)
 Give throughout the land
 Thy pure and joy-inspiring Word.
 Destroy all the hypocrites
 Here and everywhere!

SUZUKI cd³⁶ (2003)
 Give unfalsified to the world
 Your blessed word.
 Destroy the devil
 Here and throughout the world.

Is God's *seligmachend* Word grace-inspiring, pure, joy-inspiring, blessed, or beatific? Only the rendition "beatific" (whose precise meaning is, "making

blessed”) approaches the right idea, but even it is probably not quite correct. Bach’s librettist most likely alludes to a notion of God’s Word as *salvific* (i.e., *selig* in the sense of “eternally blessed,” though this would be, of course, a heavenly blessedness experienced proleptically in the services in Bach’s Leipzig churches), something proclaimed at James 1:21:³⁷

Darum so leget ab alle Unsauberkeit und alle Bosheit und nehmet das Wort an mit Sanftmut, das in euch gepflanzt ist, welches kann eure Seelen selig machen.

(“Therefore lay aside all filthiness and all evil, and accept with meekness the Word that is planted in you, which is able to make your souls blessed [i.e., which is able to save your souls].”)

The Cantata 190 passage is thus best translated as “Grant uncorrupted in the land / Your saving Word. / Put the hypocrites to shame / Here and in every place!”³⁸

As a final, more involved example of questions of theological understanding, consider the tenor recitative from Cantata 31, *Der Himmel lacht! die Erde jubiliert*, which presents the additional problem of having several different readings of the German text in modern editions. Bach’s own score does not survive; the earliest source is the set of vocal parts that Samuel Gottlieb Heder, a student at the Thomasschule, copied in 1731.³⁹ Heder was evidently confused by Bach’s score (from which he apparently copied), and modern editors have sometimes ventured further improvements on Heder’s solutions to the problems in his model. Here is the German text as it most likely should read, along with various translations (and their German sources, if different from the italicized lines 4–6).

So stehe dann, du gottergebne Seele,
Mit Christo geistlich auf!
Tritt an den neuen Lebenslauf!
Auf! von den toten Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in dir lebt,
An deinem Leben merken!
Der Weinstock, der jetzt blüht,
Trägt keine tote Reben!
Der Lebensbaum läßt seine Zweige leben!
Ein Christe flieht
Ganz eilend von dem Grabe!
Er läßt den Stein,
Er läßt das Tuch der Sünden
Dahinten
Und will mit Christo lebend sein.

TERRY (1926)

Flee all the works of darkness!
Soul, let thy Saviour now above
remark thy love and goodness!

DRINKER (1942)

Up! follow now thy Saviour.
Stay, let Him ever live in thee,
and mark well thy behaviour!
Auf! von den toten (*or*, Todes)
Werken!
Lass, lass [*sic*] dein Heiland in dir
[*sic*] Welt,
an deinem Leben merken!

HARNONCOURT cd⁴⁰ (1974)

Up! follow now thy Saviour.
Stay, let Him ever live in thee,
and mark well thy behaviour!
booklet and performance:
Auf! von des Todes Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in der Welt,
An deinem Leben merken!

AMBROSE (1984)

Rise, leave the works of dying!

Make thine own Savior in the world

Be in thy life reflected!

Auf! von den toten Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in der Welt,
An deinem Leben merken!

KOOPMAN cd⁴¹ (1995)

Up! follow now thy Saviour.
Stay, let Him ever live in thee,
And mark well thy behaviour!

booklet:

Auf! von des Todes Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in der
Welt, an deinem Leben
merken!

performance:

... in dir weiht [?], ...

UNGER (1996)

Up from thy dead works!
Allow thy Savior to live in thee,
To be observed in thy life!
Auf! von den toten Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in dir lebt,
An deinem Leben merken!

SUZUKI cd⁴² (1998)

Up, from the works of death.
May the saviour in the world
regard your life.

booklet:

Auf! von des Todes Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in der
Welt,
an deinem Leben merken!

performance:

... von den toten Werken!
... in dir lebt, ...

STOKES (1999)

Rise! Abandon the pursuit of
death!

Let the existence of the Saviour in
this world

Be reflected in your life!

Auf! von des Todes Werken!
Laß, daß dein Heiland in der
Welt,
An deinem Leben merken!

The libretto booklets distributed in Bach's churches for renderings of the cantata in 1724 and 1731 both provide the surely correct reading "von den toten Werken," a phrase presumably alluding to Luther's translation of Hebrews 9:14⁴³:

Denn so der Ochsen und der Böcke Blut, und die Asche, von der Kuhe gesprengt, heiligt die Unreinen zu der leiblichen Reinigkeit, wie vielmehr wird das Blut Christi, der sich selbst ohne allen Wandel durch den Heiligen Geist GOTT geopfert hat, unser Gewissen reinigen *von den toten Werken*, zu dienen dem lebendigen GOTT!

("For if the blood of oxen and goats and the sprinkled ashes of the heifer sanctifies the impure person unto bodily purity, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the Holy Spirit offered himself immutable to God, purge our conscience *from dead works*, to serve the living God?")

Cantata 31, then, speaks not of the "works of darkness," the "works of dying," the "works of death," a "pursuit of death," or of "*your* dead works" but rather of "works that are [per se] dead." Luther's notion here is that works are "dead" because they can do nothing to justify a person in the face of God's wrath. According to Luther, persons can be justified before God only by having Christ's righteousness imputed to them, as appropriated through the unmerited gift of faith. Good works are the *fruit* of right faith; they are of no help in justification.⁴⁴

The more likely reading of line 5, "Laß, daß dein Heiland *in dir lebt*"⁴⁵ (not ". . . *in der Welt*"), advocates humans' focusing only on Christ's imputed righteousness (i.e., because the Saviour "lives in you"). The passage from Cantata 31—best translated as "Up, from dead works! / Let [the fact] that your Saviour lives in you / be observed in your life!"—in true Lutheran fashion does not advocate reward for good works or for any ritual acts of purification.

PASSAGES OBSCURED BY ARCHAIC LANGUAGE

For the bass recitative from Cantata 39, many translators render *milde* as "gentle."

Der reiche Gott wirft seinen Überfluß
Auf uns, die wir ohn ihn auch nicht den Odem haben.
Sein ist es, was wir sind; er gibt nur den Genuß,
Doch nicht, daß uns allein
Nur seine Schätze laben.
Sie sind der Probestein,

*Wodurch er macht bekannt,
 Daß er der Armut auch die Notdurft ausgesendet,
 Als er mit milder Hand,
 Was jener nötig ist, uns reichlich zugewendet.
 Wir sollen ihm für sein gelehntes Gut
 Die Zinse nicht in seine Scheuren bringen;
 Barmherzigkeit, die auf dem Nächsten ruht,
 Kann mehr als alle Gab ihm an das Herze dringen.*

TERRY (1926)

They are a trust, indeed,
 in that He asks our care
 to give from out our plenty where our help
 is needed,
 as He, with favour rare,
 to meet our daily need
 with lavish hand's provided.

HERREWEGHE cd⁴⁷ (1993)

They are the touchstone
 by which he makes known
 that he alleviates poverty as well
 as necessity,
 since he richly bestows whatever
 is necessary
 with gentle hand.

DRINKER (1942)

they are the touchstones, too,
 by which He tells to you
 that what He gives is not alone to fill
 your need,
 but that for poorer folk you have the
 wherewithal
 their hungry mouths to feed.

UNGER (1996)

They are the touchstone,
 by which he makes known
 That he has also provided the poor
 with their necessities,
 When he with liberal hand,
 Richly bestows on us what is
 needful to them.

LEONHARDT cd⁴⁶ (1975)

they are the touchstones, too,
 by which He tells to you
 that what He gives is not alone to fill
 your need,
 but that for poorer folk you have the
 wherewithal
 their hungry mouths to feed.

STOKES (1999)

They are the touchstone,
 By which He reveals
 That He provides the bare necessities
 even for the poor,
 When He with gentle hand
 Showers upon us all that they need.

AMBROSE (1984)

They as a touchstone serve,
 By which he hath revealed
 That he to poor men also need hath freely
 given,
 And hath with open hand,
 Whate'er the poor require, to us so richly
 proffered.

KOOPMAN cd⁴⁸ (2004)

They as a touchstone serve
 By which he hath revealed
 That he to poor men also need
 hath freely given,
 And hath with open hand,
 Whate'er the poor require, to us so
 richly proffered.

In the eighteenth century, however, this word had several meanings, including *freigebig* (“generous”). This is the understanding readers in Bach’s day would have brought to such passages as Psalm 37:21 (which speaks of the righteous person, who is generous⁴⁹), Ecclesiastes 7:7 (which speaks of corrupting a generous heart⁵⁰), and Ezekiel 16:36–37 (which speaks of the wanton [i.e., an ironic “generous”] outpouring of one’s wealth⁵¹). In Cantata 39 *milde* as “generous” makes a great deal more sense than as “gentle.”

For a second example: Even in Bach’s day *mildiglich* was an archaism, an older form for *milde*. Thus the last line of the closing chorale from Cantata 28, *Gottlob! nun geht das Jahr zu Ende*, should most likely be translated, “And feed us *generously*” rather than “gently” or “tenderly.”

All solch dein Güt wir preisen,
Vater ins Himmels Thron,
Die du uns tust beweisen
Durch Christum, deinen Sohn,
Und bitten ferner dich:
Gib uns ein friedsam Jahre,
Für allem Leid bewahre
Und nähr uns mildiglich.

TERRY (1926)

We beg a further prayer:
“Peace with the New Year send us,
From every ill defend us,
And hold us in Thy care!”

DRINKER (1942)

do Thou our prayer hear:
“In paths of peace direct us,
from ev’ry ill protect us,
thruout this coming year.”

HARNONCOURT cd⁵² (1974)

do Thou our prayer hear:
In paths of peace direct us,
from ev’ry ill protect us,
thruout this coming year.

AMBROSE (1984)

And further ask of thee:
Give us a peaceful year now,
From ev’ry woe defend us
And us with kindness feed.

UNGER (1996)

And ask furthermore of thee:
Give us a peaceful year;
From all harm protect
And feed us tenderly.

STOKES (1999)

And beseech Thee now as well
To grant us a peaceful year,
To protect us from all sorrow
And gently to sustain us.

KOOPMAN cd⁵³ (2004)

And further ask of thee:
Give us a peaceful year now,
From ev’ry woe defend us
And us with kindness feed.

PASSAGES THAT ARE SIMPLY DIFFICULT

Some passages in the librettos from Bach's church cantatas are on the face of it simply difficult.⁵⁴ One notorious line that has plagued many readers appears in the closing movement from Cantata 60, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, a four-part chorale inevitably encountered in undergraduate harmony and counterpoint classes. What does it mean to exclaim, as this text does, "Herr, wenn es dir gefällt, *so spanne mich doch aus*"?

*Es ist genug;
Herr, wenn es dir gefällt,
So spanne mich doch aus!
Mein Jesu kömmt;
Nun gute Nacht, o Welt!
Ich fahr ins Himmelshaus,
Ich fahre sicher hin mit Frieden,
Mein großer Jammer bleibt danieden.
Es ist genug.*

TERRY (1926)
It is enough!
Lord, brace me to the test
When toward me Death shall nod!

UNGER (1996)
It is enough;
Lord, if it pleases thee,
Then indeed put me to rest!

DRINKER (1942)
It is enough:
Lord, when it pleases Thee
do Thou unshackle me.

KOOPMAN cd⁵⁶ (1999)
It is enough,
Lord, when it pleases Thee
Do Thou unshackle me.

HARNONCOURT cd⁵⁵ (1976)
It is enough;
Lord, when it pleases Thee
do Thou unshackle me.

STOKES (1999)
It is enough:
Lord, if it be Thy will,
Free me from my burden!

AMBROSE (1984)
It is enough;
Lord, if it be thy will,
Then let me rest in peace!

SUZUKI cd⁵⁷ (2001)
It is enough:
Lord, if it pleases you
Let me relax.

I suspect that Drinker and Stokes are closest to the sense of this passage and its use of the word *ausspannen*. Luther's translation of Job 30:11 may provide a helpful clue:

Sie haben mein Seil ausgespannet, und mich zunichte gemacht, und das Meine abgezäumet.

("They have unharnessed my rope, and ruined me, and unbridled what is mine.")

Ausspannen otherwise appears in the Old Testament of the Luther Bibles of Bach's day only at Ezekiel 26:4, 5, 14 and Hosea 5:1, each time having to do with the spreading out of fishnets; the verb does not show up in Luther's New Testament.

Considering Luther's use in Job 30:11 of *abgezäumet* ("unbridled"), and considering the standard German expression *Die Pferde ausspannen* ("unharness the horses"), I would offer as a best construal for Cantata 60's vexing *So spanne mich doch aus* the rendering: "Then do unharness me [of the world's 'trappings,' and from the yoke of the world's endless sorrows, trials, and burdens⁵⁸]." These sentiments were certainly explored fully in many Lutheran sermons of Bach's day and earlier. For example, in a late seventeenth-century collection of funeral sermons Heinrich Müller writes:

Simeon nennet den Tod eine Außspannung. [In marg. Luc 2/29.] Hie sind wir eingespannet in das Joch der Mühe / deß Jammers und Leidens. Der Tod spannet uns auß aus dem Leidens= und Angst=Joch.⁵⁹

("Simeon calls death an unharnessing [margin: "Luke 2:29"⁶⁰]. Here [in the present world] we are harnessed in the yoke of trouble, misery, and suffering. Death unharnesses us out from the yoke of suffering and fear.")

Each of these new suggested renderings for the librettos from Bach's cantatas works out of insights that are likely to occur to us only with a knowledge of the broader religious contexts of Bach's music and poetry. Unlike us, Bach lived and worked in a biblically literate culture. We cannot hope adequately to understand his output unless we work to become historically informed about his religious *Sitz im Leben*, whatever our own predilections might be.

NOTES

1. Charles Sanford Terry, *Joh. Seb. Bach: Cantata Texts, Sacred and Secular; with a Reconstruction of the Leipzig Liturgy of His Period* (London: Constable, 1926).

2. Henry S. Drinker, *Texts of the Choral Works of Johann Sebastian Bach in English Translation*, 2 vols. (New York: Association of American Colleges, Arts Program; 1942–1943). On the whole, neither Terry's nor Drinker's translation promotes historically informed understanding of the librettos Bach set to music. Drinker's intent was to make acceptable singing translations, not to convey essentially literal meanings to listeners following the German; nonetheless, many early-music recordings have adopted his readings for their cd booklets.

3. Teldec 242609.

4. *The Texts to Johann Sebastian Bach's Church Cantatas*, trans. Z. Philip Ambrose (Hänssler: Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1984).

5. Melvin P. Unger, *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996). This is by far the best translation of the librettos from Bach's cantatas.

6. Harmonia mundi France 901594. Record companies often claim historical "authenticity" for their productions. For convenience I have identified recordings by their conductors, but this is not meant to suggest that conductors always have control over all aspects of their recordings, including the libretto translations.

7. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Complete Church and Secular Cantatas*, trans. Richard Stokes (Ebrington, Gloucestershire: Long Barn Books, 1999).

8. Challenge Classics 72213.

9. Allusion noted in Ulrich Meyer, *Biblical Quotation and Allusion in the Cantata Libretti of Johann Sebastian Bach* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 15. See also John 6:44. This does not, however, make for good poetry: in the surrounding lines it is the noun at the beginning of the line that initiates the action.

10. Teldec 2425000.

11. Erato 0630-12598.

12. BIS 791.

13. Harmonia mundi France 901694.

14. Dorian 93231.

15. The allusion is noted in Meyer, 56; also in Unger, 43.

16. Cf. Revelation 2:10, where suffering and the "crown of life" are linked. Compare also, e.g., the early eighteenth-century picture of God holding out a crown and cross for the follower of Christ in Lucia Haselböck, *Bach Textlexikon: Ein Wörterbuch der religiösen Sprachbilder im Vokalwerk von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2004), 127.

17. See the either/or analysis of ritornellos and episodes in Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 59–102. Perhaps Dreyfus is too rigid in saying that segments of Bach's concerto-style music belong to one or the other category. Are not, e.g., bars 46–47 of the first movement from Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto working simultaneously as the final segment of an episode (see the sequence from D–g–C–F at bars 40–47) and as the first segment of the ensuing ritornello (see the ritornello segments 1 and 2 at bars 46–50)?

18. Johann Sebastian Bach, *Kantate 12: Weinen, Klagen*, ed. Arnold Schering (Zürich: Eulenberg, 1926).

19. Teldec 242632.

20. Ricercar 061041.

21. Erato 0630-12598.

22. BIS 841.

23. Atma 2-2279.

24. Noted in Terry, 101; Meyer, 13; and Unger, 521.

25. Teldec 2292-42583.

26. Archiv 463586.

27. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, trans. Paul D. Pahl, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, vol. 6 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 144, where Luther states, "Without any controversy we shall say that this man [with whom Jacob wrestled] was not an angel but our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal God and future Man, to be crucified by the Jews."

28. Teldec 242577.

29. Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre 417250.

30. Harmonia mundi France 901326.

31. This allusion noted in Meyer, 159.

32. In other Luther Bibles of Bach's day, *verneuert*.

33. Also, Paul's word "renew" [Greek, *anakainoo*] means "made new in [something's] nature," as opposed to "new in time" [*neos*]; see Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, trans. and abridged by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 388. Hence Luther's rendering as "[v]erneuert."

34. In most contemporary hymnbooks, not *Heuchler* but *Teufel* (Werner Neumann, ed., *Sämtliche von Johann Sebastian Bach vertonte Texte* [Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1974], 40).

35. Erato 3984-21629.

36. BIS 1311.

37. The allusion is noted in Meyer, 17.

38. For *unverfälscht*, see the "uncorrupted doctrine" (Luther, "unverfälschte Lehre") of Titus 2:7.

39. For the details, see Alfred Dürr, *Kantaten zum 1. Ostertag: Kritischer Bericht*, Johann Sebastian Bach, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, series 1, vol. 9 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1986), 37–39.

40. Teldec 242505.

41. Erato 4509-98536.

42. BIS 851.

43. The allusion is noted in Dürr, 52; Unger, 112; and Meyer, 47.

44. For a full discussion, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther on Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), and Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, rev. and expanded ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

45. See also Galatians 2:20, . . . *Christus lebet in mir* ("Christ lives in me"); noted in Meyer, 47.

46. Teldec 8.35269.

47. Virgin Classics 7-59320.

48. Challenge Classics 72216.

49. Luther, "Der Gottlose borget und bezahlet nicht; der Gerechte aber ist barmherzig und milde."

50. Luther (verse 8 in the Bibles of Bach's day), "Ein Widerspenstiger machet einen Weisen unwillig und verderbet ein mild Herz."

51. Luther, "So spricht der HERR HERR: Weil du denn so milde Geld zugibst, und deine Scham durch deine Hurerey gegen deine Bulen entblößest und gegen alle

Götzen deiner Greuel; und vergeußest das Blut deiner Kinder, welche du ihnen opferst; darum siehe, will ich sammeln alle deine Bulen, mit welchen du Wohllust getrieben hast, samt allen, die du für Freunde hieltest, zu deinen Feinden; und will sie beyde wider dich samlen allenthalben und will ihnen deine Scham blößen, daß sie deine Scham gar sehen sollen." In other Bibles, not "wealth" (Luther, "Geld") but "lust."

52. Teldec 242504.

53. Challenge Classics 72215.

54. For example, even Werner Neumann, a German specialist on the librettos Bach set, says of the poetry in the thirteenth movement from Cantata 76: "it is hard to understand." Neumann, 100.

55. Teldec 8.43745.

56. Erato 3984-25488.

57. BIS 1111.

58. See the penultimate line of the chorale stanza, "Mein großer Jammer bleibt danieden."

59. Heinrich Müller, *Gräber der Heiligen / Mit Christlichen Leich=Predigten*, ed. Johannes Caspar Heinsius (Frankfurt am Main, 1685), 478–79; quoted in Renate Steiger, *Gnadengegenwart: Johann Sebastian Bach im Kontext lutherischer Orthodoxie und Frommigkeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002), 113. In Dietrich Buxtehude's cantata *Ich habe Lust abzuschneiden*, BuxWV 47, "ausspannen" is employed to express these same sentiments.

60. That is, referring to the Greek word *apolyo*, "dismiss" or "set free." Note, too, that the line "Ich fahre sicher hin mit Frieden" at the end of the chorale from Cantata 60 alludes to Luther's translation of Luke 2:29 ("HErr, nun lässest du deinen Diener im Frieden fahren").